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ABSTRACT

The Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) is a program for Minnesota families with children from birth to the age of kindergarten enrollment. This booklet provides answers to common questions asked by individuals interested in the ECFE. The booklet's first section, "What Is Early Childhood Family Education," describes the model, while the second section, "What Happens in Early Childhood Family Education?" details the program components. The third section, "Who Participates in Early Childhood Family Education?" describes the importance of parental participation. The fourth section, "Why Start at Birth?" describes recent research concerning the importance of the first 3 years of life in child development. The fifth section, "Why Involve Parents?" describes recent research showing that early childhood programs are more effective with parental involvement. The sixth section, "Why Do We Need Early Childhood Family Education?" acknowledges the difficult nature of the parenting process and describes how the program seeks to help families succeed. The seventh section, "How Is ECFE Funded and What Does It Cost?" lists registration fees and funding sources. The eighth section, "Who Benefits from Early Childhood Family Education?" argues that all of society benefits from the program. The guide's final section provides quotations from past participants on their experiences with the program. (SD)

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# ECFE

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## Questions & Answers

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# What is Early Childhood Family Education?

Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) is a program for all Minnesota families with children between the ages of birth and kindergarten enrollment. The program recognizes that families provide children's first and most important learning environments and parents are children's first and most significant teachers. Early Childhood Family Education works to strengthen families and enhance the ability of all parents to provide the best possible environment for the healthy growth and development of their children. It is the largest and oldest program of its kind in the country and has been cited as a national model for parent education and family support.

## What happens in Early Childhood Family Education?

Early Childhood Family Education programs are locally designed to meet the needs of families in their communities. Most programs include the following components for children and parents:

- Parent discussion groups
- Play and learning activities for children
- Parent-child activities
- Special events for the entire family
- Home visits
- Early screening for children's health and developmental problems
- Community resource information for families and young children
- Libraries of books, toys, and other learning materials

Each program has an advisory council which helps to match services to community needs. Participating parents make up a majority of the advisory council membership.

Licensed parent educators and early childhood teachers offer program activities in school buildings, homes, shopping centers, public libraries, health clinics, apartment buildings, homeless shelters, religious institutions, and other community sites. The programs work closely with other education, health, and human service agencies to assist parents and children in obtaining needed services.

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## Who participates in Early Childhood Family Education?

Parents and children participate together. Participation by families is voluntary and services are offered free or for a nominal fee. Fees are waived for families unable to pay. Early Childhood Family Education is committed to universal access for *all* families. Availability of the program to all families avoids the potential segregation, stigma, and labeling associated with targeted programs. All parents can benefit from support and information, especially during the early years of parenting.

Recognizing that families have different needs, programs offer sessions for families with specific concerns such as parents of infants, single parents, teen parents, parents of children with special needs, immigrant families, and others. It is the goal of Early Childhood Family Education to serve a representative cross-section of families with young children in each community. This frequently requires special outreach and program delivery strategies.

## Why start at birth?

Brain research confirms that the first three years are an extremely critical period in a child's development, especially in the areas of language, social skills, and the roots of intelligence. An infant's daily interactions with caregivers actually determine the structures of neural pathways in the brain. Informed parents who have friends and positive connections in their communities are better equipped for the challenges of caring for infants and toddlers. These early years are also a time when most parents are receptive to information and support.

## Why involve parents?

Research shows that early childhood programs involving both parents and children are more effective than programs focusing exclusively on children. Educators and psychologists contend that it is vital for early childhood programs to assist parents in their role as primary educators of their children. Involving families prior to kindergarten enrollment encourages parents to play an active role in their children's learning from birth into the elementary years and beyond. And research confirms that children whose parents are involved in their education and learning are more successful in school.

## Why do we need Early Childhood Family Education?

Contrary to the belief that raising children comes naturally, there is growing recognition that being a parent is extremely demanding and difficult work. It requires learning new skills and focusing on children's needs, and it is facilitated by the support and help of family, friends, and community.

Changes in society underscore the need for Early Childhood Family Education. The high mobility of American families means that adults are often far from family and friends during their parenting years. The high divorce rate creates a growing number of single parent and stepparent families. Economic pressures result in more families in which both parents are employed. The general complexity of modern life combines with these factors to create intense stress on families of all income levels. Finally, a growing percentage of children and families are living in poverty, which makes meeting even basic needs a daily struggle.

## How is ECFE funded & what does it cost?

Early Childhood Family Education was developed through a series of pilot programs funded by the Minnesota Legislature and coordinated by the Minnesota Council on Quality Education from 1974 to 1983. In 1984, the legislature made it possible for any school district with a Community Education program to establish an Early Childhood Family Education program. The programs are financed with combined local and state funding, which may be supplemented with registration fees and funds from other sources.

The basic program includes parent education, early childhood education, and parent-child interaction, and families typically participate two hours a week throughout the school year. Costs to deliver the program vary with extent, intensity, and location of services. At an average cost to the program of $400 per participant, ECFE costs less than many programs focusing primarily on children. Parents pay only nominal fees that are reduced or waived upon request.

## Who benefits from Early Childhood Family Education?

All society benefits from strong families and healthy, well developed children. The potential of Early Childhood Family Education to prevent or reduce later learning problems of children is confirmed by evaluation of the Minnesota programs and similar programs throughout the country. Parents report increased feelings of support and confidence in their parenting role, better understanding of how children develop, changed expectations for themselves and their children, and improved parenting behaviors. Program evaluations also show that Early Childhood Family Education is effective with families of all income levels.

Research strongly suggests that dollars spent on Early Childhood Family Education are more than repaid by savings in remedial health, education, and welfare costs during later school years. And strong families are the foundation of a strong society now and far into the future.

## What do parents say about . . .

"ECFE provides the support system many parents need at a crucial time of their life. Raising children has never been easy, but today our society makes extra demands on all of us. If we are aware of our children's needs and our own feelings, life can be a lot more enjoyable."

• • •

"My children were born when my husband and I were in our early twenties. We were young and uninformed about parenting. Now, I think that ECFE should be required of every parent before they even have kids!"

• • •

"When my son throws things, I try to keep it in perspective. I no longer yell and slap. I relax and don't push him all the time. I've learned different ways to discipline."

• • •

"I was a male, widowed with two small children, and ECFE saved my life!"

• • •

"My two older kids are now students in elementary school. Their teachers have told me that they can tell which children have attended ECFE because of their behavior and approach to learning. I have been on the ECFE Advisory Council for six years, and I am now on the elementary school PTA Board. In fact, all the current members of the PTA Board are or were parents who went to ECFE."

## . . . Early Childhood Family Education?

"With the help of the ECFE program, I was working to stop the cycle of abuse and neglect from repeating itself in my own and my children's lives. The difficult times for myself and my children are not over, but I know that the program is still there to help me and my family through. I am now in the process of rebuilding my life, my hopes, and dreams. I can see a reflection of my participation in the ECFE program in my youngest child. She has developed a positive outlook on life. She is happy, she feels loved and special. And this has helped me to dream again. I once again have hope."

• • •

"I learned the difference between discipline and punishment—discipline is teaching and punishment is being mean to them. I learned different styles of parenting. Being a dad that your child is going to like a lot, but still be firm."

• • •

"Raising children is a wonderful, awesome, and sometimes overwhelming experience. It is a shame that a job so important is generally without adequate preparation. ECFE provides some of that preparation, knowledge, and support that is so vital to being a good parent. It is not a frill. It's a necessity."

*Photos courtesy of Minneapolis, Mounds View, Osseo, and Saint Paul Public Schools.*

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*Children, Families & Learning*

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or the **Early Childhood Family Education** program in your local school district.